

Pursuant to Executive Order 13985 (January 20, 2021) on  
"Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved  
Communities Through the Federal Government"

## Equity Action Plan Summary

# U.S. Department of Defense

The Department of Defense (DoD) is America's largest government agency. With our military tracing its roots back to pre-Revolutionary times, the Department has grown and evolved with our nation. DoD's mission is to provide the military forces needed to deter war and ensure our nation's security.

## Delivering equity through DoD

The military community and military families are proudly diverse, with significantly greater representation of communities of color than in the general population. One of the most important ways DoD is advancing equity for underserved communities is by enhancing support for military families and addressing the barriers underserved military families face in achieving economic security and health equity. At the same time, while the Department of Defense has historically focused on increasing equity to those within the DoD community, the collective actions described in this plan represent a shift in the Department's approach and focus to better ensure that we leverage our capabilities to create opportunities for all Americans, including for small, disadvantaged businesses, and to ensure that all qualified Americans can serve their country in uniform.

## New strategies to advance equity

- **Increase economic opportunities for small business, including businesses from underserved communities, and expand contracting with entities employing individuals with disabilities, including under the AbilityOne Program**

Small, disadvantaged businesses face challenges to equitable participation in DoD contracting opportunities, including complex compliance requirements, the lack of simplified and clear entry points for small businesses into the defense marketplace, and unclear communication about opportunities for small businesses. To address these barriers, the Department will set, resource, and implement a galvanizing goal around advancing opportunities for prime and subcontractors who are members of underserved communities; advance equity through requirements on wage setting and labor practices in the Department's contractor workforce and supply chain; and empower small business programs and initiatives to lead policy and management practices across the Department.

- **Advance equity by addressing past harms resulting from environmental and other impacts from defense activities on communities around military installations and bases, especially Native American lands, Alaska Native Claims Settlement-conveyed properties, ancestral lands, and reserved treaty rights areas**

Legacy impacts from military operations may include hazardous materials, debris, underground fuel storage tanks, lead-based paint, asbestos, munitions or explosives residue, and abandoned or unsafe sites. These legacy impacts create barriers to Indigenous populations remaining on those lands and inhibit their development. To address these barriers, the Department will evaluate which communities may be experiencing impacts and invest in mitigating those effects and advancing equitable outcomes for those communities. The Department will also seek opportunities for significant new investments in underserved communities around military bases and installations, including managing and restoring habitats and wildlife populations and enhancing public recreation opportunities.

New strategies to advance equity

● **Advance equity for military families, including those who are members of underserved communities**

The individuals who choose to serve in our nation's Armed Forces make sacrifices of their time, talents, careers, and, in some instances, their lives, in order to maintain and strengthen the United States military. These sacrifices extend to the spouses and children of Service members who are often uprooted from employment, family, friends, and schools, relocated to new geographic locations every few years, and expected to adapt and maintain resiliency within their families. The Department seeks to advance equity for military families who are members of underserved communities. Service members and their families are stationed throughout the world, which can result in a lack of access to educational options. Public school districts, particularly those in rural or remote locations, may have limited financial resources or capacity to address facility deficiencies or provide special education programs for students with disabilities. To address these barriers, DoD will drive towards more equitable outcomes for students of color, students with disabilities, and students from other underserved communities in DoD schools and disadvantaged public schools operated by local civilian communities, including by constructing, renovating, or expanding elementary and secondary public schools on military installations in order to address capacity or facility condition deficiencies, and implementing innovative special education programs to provide more inclusive educational experiences. Another barrier experienced by military families is the loss of a steady second income due to the inability of military spouses to maintain consistent employment because of the demands of the mobile military lifestyle, such as frequent moves and single parenting during deployments of the military member.

To address these barriers to economic security of military families and spouses, and advance gender equity, DoD will pursue enhancements to its programs for spousal employment and increase access to child care, on- and off-base. Some military families also experience food insecurity. DoD recognizes that a military family's economic status is closely linked

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to the Service member's grade and position in the military, and minority Service members, who are under-represented at senior leader grades, may face greater risks of economic insecurity. DoD is taking immediate steps to address food insecurity, beginning with developing a strategy and implementation roadmap for strengthening food security across the Force. DoD is also taking steps to advance equity in access to healthcare, including by taking steps to fully implement a policy that will provide access to gender-affirming medical care for transgender Service members.

- **Address the safe and ethical use of AI technology and leading innovation in the use of this technology**

Modern applications of technology like machine learning raise ethical concerns due to the scope, scale, and speed at which they operate, potentially learning and magnifying existing inequities that influenced historical data. Examples of these issues have been reported in non-Department systems, such as initial AI face recognition algorithms having difficulty recognizing darker-skinned individuals and initial AI resume screening algorithms learning and magnifying the biases of human screeners. To address these barriers, the Department will invest in an agency-wide responsible AI development framework to ensure ethical (to include equitable) AI in business as well as battlefield operations and invest in the development of a more diverse AI workforce, including through the Department's partnerships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU)s and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs).

- **Invest in underserved communities and expand access to Department programs and opportunities**

DoD seeks to invest in underserved communities and expand access to DoD programs and opportunities. This includes advancing equity in K-12, college, and university settings through DoD programs, partnerships, and federal grant opportunities. DoD has found that MSIs, including HBCUs, face unique barriers in accessing DoD partnership opportunities, including the lack of resources currently available to MSIs to expand their

### New strategies to advance equity

infrastructure and research capacity. To address these barriers, DoD will coordinate expanding investments in MSIs across the nation, including by developing research capacity at institutions that have traditionally received less research funding from the Department. DoD will develop a strategy for increasing investments in K-12 workforce readiness programs to help grow a diverse STEM talent pool.

## Building on DoD's progress

**This equity action plan builds on DoD's progress delivering on equity and racial justice in the first year of the Biden-Harris Administration.**

- **Conducting an All of Department “Stand Down on Anti-discrimination”**

In February 2021, Secretary Austin directed commanding officers and supervisors at all levels to conduct a one-day “stand down” for discussion of the principle that all those who support the Department’s mission deserve an environment free of discrimination, hate, and harassment. This included a focus on how extremist or dissident ideologies violate the fundamental principles of the Department.

- **Restoring open service for transgender Service members**

DoD has taken steps to ensure transgender individuals who wish to serve in the military and meet the appropriate standards are able to do so openly and free from discrimination. The Department accomplished this by revising multiple policies to bring them into compliance with Executive Order 14004, Enabling All Qualified Americans to Serve Their Country in Uniform.

- **Emphasizing the role of Small businesses in the Defense Industrial Base**

In October 2021, Secretary Austin issued a memorandum emphasizing the important role of small businesses in the defense industrial base. The memorandum tasked the Department’s Office of Small Business Programs (OSBP) with refreshing the Department’s Small Business Strategy to maximize small business capabilities through a Department-wide approach. This strategy will better align the Department’s efforts with the President’s focus on increasing the share of dollars going to small disadvantaged businesses by lowering barriers to entry and increasing competition opportunities for small businesses and traditionally underrepresented entrepreneurs. OSBP is currently creating an implementation plan to accompany this new strategy to ensure clear

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adherence and measures of success for increasing the small business footprint in the contracting marketplace.

- **Supporting Minority Serving Institutions and delivery of two Centers of Excellence at HBCUs**

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2021, to build infrastructure and enhance education programs at HBCUs and MSIs, the Department's HBCU/MSI Program awarded 70 equipment grants totaling \$30.4 million to 32 HBCUs, 37 MSIs, and 1 Tribal College or University. Moreover, in FY 2021, the Department launched two new Centers of Excellence (COE) in Biotechnology and Materials Science at HBCUs, totaling \$15 million investments.

- **Reaffirming the Department's ethical principles for AI**

In May 2021, Deputy Secretary of Defense Hicks issued a memorandum reaffirming the Department's Ethical Principles for AI as being responsible, equitable, traceable, reliable, and governable. The memo further tasks the Joint Artificial Intelligence Center to be the Department's coordinator for the development and implementation of the Responsible Artificial Intelligence strategy. Similarly, the Department's Defense Innovation Unit publicly released voluntary implementation guidance for responsible AI, which provides a practical approach for incorporating the Department's AI Ethics Principles in AI product planning, development, testing, and evaluation.

- **Supporting military families**

DoD took action to address economic insecurity among military families, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Secretary announced a series of economic and food security initiatives in November 2021, which included temporary increases in Basic Allowance for Housing and increases in authorizations for Temporary Lodging Expenses. The Department also released a Military Leader's Economic Security Toolkit with specific resources for leaders on how to identify Service members

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who are struggling to feed themselves and their families, how to engage in difficult conversations to assess food insecurity, and connect Service members to additional resources and support programs. Furthermore, the Department introduced two pilot offerings, FlexJobs and Udemy, to bolster military spouse employment opportunities.